

# “The most potent force of the future”: the ministry and citizenship of Presbyterian women in the aftermath of the Great War

LESLEY ORR MACDONALD, M.A., Ph.D.

1998 was the 80th anniversary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which gave the Parliamentary vote to female householders and wives of householders over the age of 30, and enabled women to stand as candidates for Parliament. It was the 70th anniversary of the 1928 Act which introduced the universal franchise for all women and men aged 21 or over. And it was the 30th anniversary of the legislation which made women eligible, on the same terms as men, for the ministry of Word and Sacrament within the Church of Scotland. On 6 May 1999, 37% of those elected to serve in the first Scottish Parliament to be convened for 292 years, were women. Indeed, it was a woman who broke the long democratic silence in Scotland. In the hallowed Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, where generations of male ministers and elders (now joined by an increasing minority of women) have met to deliberate about the affairs of church and nation, Winifred Ewing MSP, as senior member, called the first meeting of the new Parliament to order. This is an auspicious time for a woman rooted in the Presbyterian traditions of this nation, to look back and recall those whose aspirations to ministry and citizenship prepared the ground, and broke new paths for Scottish women who now follow in their footsteps. In my own youthful past, there were times when I thought I might be a minister, and more particularly, when my declared ambition was to be Prime Minister, so the involvement of women in religious and political structures and responsibilities has been of great personal interest! Even now, as much affected by post-modern world weariness as anyone, I retain a dream of Scotland as a nation with a vibrant, inclusive and egalitarian political and cultural life. And I work with others to secure greater participation of women in these processes.

As a historian, my own reflections and actions are stimulated and challenged in dialogue with voices from the past which call down powerfully to the present. One such encounter happened when I read an anonymous article in the *United Free Church Record* for May 1918, entitled “An Edinburgh Churchwoman’s Beliefs Concerning her Citizenship”. Organised into nine clarion declarations, these beliefs

read rather like something which should be nailed to a door, in the style of Martin Luther's theses, so that the vision and challenge confront the readers: inviting, even demanding a response:

1. It is the divine mission of the Church to infuse with her spirit and ideals every aspect of social construction that must take place after the War.

2. The most potent force of the future in the recasting of the moulds of civilisation, is the expansive power of woman's idealising instinct. At the present time woman's influence is greater than it has been at any moment in the history of the world. This hour is the 'fullness of time' to which the granting of the privileges of citizenship to women has been divinely delayed, until it could receive its maximum impetus from the conditions of the time.

3. The Church in the past has not generally seen her duty to lie in the direction of informing and inspiring social and political thought as such to the end that it might express the spirit of Christ. Is that a reason why she should continue to refuse her responsibility and reject her opportunity?

4. God's recompense for Armageddon, and its abyss of human woe, will not come of itself and as a thief in the night. It must be planned and worked for, and the application of man's energies to this task is God's test of man's sincerity of purpose for the future.

5. If the mighty power now in the hands of women be allowed to crystallise in old, secular, outworn moulds, the loss to the world will be beyond calculation, and the guilt of the Church, in failing to recognise her opportunity to direct and inspire the women's movement, will be great in the same measure.

6. Therefore it would seem to be the Church's duty to recognise, organise and utilise this great power latent in the present situation, and that at the beginning of the movement, before it sets in purely secular grooves, as it otherwise will do. There is no time to lose – next year may be too late.

7. Every Church in Scotland should hold a solemn service of dedication to the new ideals of political privilege for the uplift of humanity and advance of the Kingdom of God. This would be as useful in giving a new vision to men, as it would be right in helping to set the women's movement into the current of God's power.

8. The Church has a big and immediate task to teach herself and her newly enfranchised women how to use citizenship for the accomplishment of the highest spiritual aims.

9. If even all Church members were inspired with an *effective* enthusiasm for true Christian ideals and service, and willed to make them serve the ends of the nation, legislation on the same level would follow naturally. Contagion of unselfish, spiritually discerned views is greater than that of base motive. Woman is the great fount of the emotions of the ideal. The spontaneous impulse to sacrifice for others is greater in her than in man. To her is committed the future of the race. As an individual, her influence has been predominant from the foundations of the world. Organised, her gifts guided into spiritual avenues of expression through the Church, woman seems destined to be the dynamic force and new centre of gravity for the future. If the free course of her spirit be not obstructed, there is no limit to the possibilities which this power could accomplish, even in the lifetime of those who are babes among us now."<sup>1</sup>

From our more cynical vantage point at this end of the twentieth century, it may be tempting to criticise elements of these "Beliefs": the tone, the impossible optimism, the identification of certain stereotyped qualities with a universalised, essentialised idea of women; the expectation that the church – yes, even the Presbyterian church in Scotland – could and should be the font of progress and change. But what a dramatic expression of hope and possibility; of confidence in the dynamism and innovation of organised women; of urgency in setting about the task – *now*, next year may be too late! Here too is a critique of the church for its failures, alongside encouragement to be faithful to its prophetic task. I really warm to that woman, whom I wish I could name, for her boldness and passion at the beginning of a new era. Her concluding phrase continues to resonate, long after I first read it, as the focus of a forceful but also poignant dialogue with a foresister whose challenge is very specifically addressed to our own day: "If the free course of her spirit be not obstructed, there is no limit to the possibilities which this power could accomplish, even in the lifetime of those who are babes among us now."<sup>2</sup>

It is not for me to speculate whether those readers who were babes in 1918, have views on the accomplishments of unobstructed women

<sup>1</sup> *United Free Church Record*, 1918, 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

during their lifetimes! But I do know that such confident expectation in unrestricted female power for moral and social good, was consistent with an ethos, expressed in religious language, symbol, imagery and drama, which imbued the campaign for female suffrage – in both its constitutional and militant aspects. Much of that movement's literature and actions emphasised that the struggle was not only political, but of deeper significance for the benefit and future development of humankind. The character of the 1912 Women's March from Edinburgh to London, for example, was described in the 1913 *Suffrage Annual* as "distinctly more religious and spiritual than political".<sup>3</sup>

The struggle for enfranchisement was a late (possibly the last) development of the idea, deeply rooted especially in evangelical protestantism, of women's special mission. This concept, from around the 1820s, translated conventional notions of female influence into the proposition that the moral power of women was crucial to the evangelical task, and became a key component in the self-understanding and action of growing numbers of Scottish churchwomen for the next hundred years. It was linked to a strong domestic ideology, which presented the appropriate – indeed divinely ordained – realm of female activity to be the private world of home and family. During the 19th, and into the 20th century, however, increasing numbers of women were exhorted to exert their supposedly distinctive qualities and influence, by extending the reach of their essentially domestic virtues, into the villages and slums of a changing Scotland, and the heathen world beyond. Many women, especially of the newly affluent and growing middle classes, were bored with gentility and restless to escape the stultifying physical and mental confines of their parlours. For them, philanthropic and church work – whether in their own communities or in foreign mission fields – provided an acceptable opportunity to exercise purposeful activity, and gave them some class-based experience of power and control over other people's lives outside their own homes. And as the perception of gratuitous female usefulness became more widespread and acceptable (such work was acceptable, precisely because it was usually unpaid, and did not sully the grace of women with anything so vulgar as salary or personal ambition), certain church activities became conventionally associated with female involvement, and participation expected as a duty:

Charity is acknowledged to be a perfectly genteel occupation for a lady. Whether as parish visitor or Sabbath School teacher, she is becomingly and usefully employed in

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<sup>3</sup> *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* (1913). 145.

working among the poor. These occupations are unremunerated, hence their gentility. No matter whether a lady have a vocation for parish visiting or Sabbath School teaching, it is expected she will take her share of one or the other.<sup>4</sup>

Yet whatever the motivation of individuals, encouragement to participate in this distinctive women's work was expressed, not in terms of personal development, but as a glorious opportunity for self-sacrificial service in response to the saving graces of Christianity, which did so much for women, by raising them from the darkness and shame of Eve. For the many ministers and others who pontificated about Women's Special Mission, spiritual elevation and social subordination went hand in hand, and were described as the only true emancipation of women.

The ideological roots of Women's Mission were embedded in the cult of domesticity and the social ascendancy of the middle-classes, in whose image the myth of "true womanhood" was constructed. For the most part it remained a conservative bolster for traditional class and gender roles. But it also contained progressive and radical possibilities. Certainly, by the turn of the century, experience and frustration within the Presbyterian denominations led some of their most able and articulate women workers to challenge the limitations of the auxiliary and subordinate roles assigned to them, and also the whole concept of unquestioned male leadership. The immense pragmatic, social, cultural and theological changes which were affecting women, and also the church, engendered debates about the nature, purpose and extent of women's ministry within the main Scottish Presbyterian denominations. One outcome was the official organisation and recognition of women's work: through mission associations, the Church of Scotland Woman's Guild (founded in 1887), and the associated introduction of an order of deaconesses. But the questions of power, status and responsibility really came to a head during the 1910s and 1920s when the place of women in the church was debated, especially within the United Free Church.

Beyond the internal organisation of church life and work, voluntary philanthropy was a springboard into female education, training and employment in public service and social work. The first wave of the reformist Women's Movement, c.1870-1920, operating in multi-faceted campaigns seeking the educational, legal and political rights women needed to take up such opportunities, was filled with veterans of traditional religious women's work and foreign missions. Many

<sup>4</sup>

*The Attempt: A Magazine for Ladies* (Edinburgh, 1869), 159.

traditional churchmen were horrified at these developments, and even those sympathetic to women's work, were ambivalent about the organised Women's Movement. The convener of the Life and Work sub-committee with responsibility for the Woman's Guild expressed some of the concerns which exercised the religious establishment, during an address given in 1894 to encourage the new organisation:

Will these changes, personal emancipations, and all this development of women workers be for good or evil? If the result is to be wholly good, must not the industrial and *world* side of women's work be accompanied and paralleled throughout by a *religious* movement, by a nobler personal and social ideal within the Church itself? Along with a growing recognition of her in human affairs as the co-equal and co-worker of man, must there not be a more distinct acknowledgement of her mission as an "angel of peace and love, as a power to elevate and purify and save"? Not otherwise can this great modern movement be rescued from the fatal grasp and spirit of mere secularism.<sup>5</sup>

Women were expected to fulfil their special mission while preserving a social order predicated on the domestic ideology. But by the time when struggle for female suffrage was most intense, there were those who concluded that women's altruistic power should supersede the reign of force imposed for so long by men. They believed that they were called to be a moral vanguard, ushering in a new Golden Age of justice and love – building the City of God on earth.

This represented a significant evolution of the "Women's Mission" concept, since it fundamentally challenged the separate spheres which had previously been delineated for women and men. Earlier changes in both church and society had shown the elasticity of that notion, but now the basic distinction between private and public, the realm of women and of men, was expressly denied. Sandra Holton has written in her book, *Feminism and Democracy*:

British feminists insisted on both the necessity of increasing state intervention in areas which had previously been part of women's domestic preserve, and the concomitant need for women's participation in the work of the state. In asserting both, they challenged the notion that domestic and political

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<sup>5</sup> *Life and Work* (1894), 116.

spheres could be kept apart as separate concerns of women and men.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the claim that women had both right and duty to share responsibility for the political domain, did not mean that most suffrage campaigners renounced the conventional belief that men and women had distinctive natures and qualities derived from their biology. Rather, they drew strength from such essentialism, and used it in their propaganda, arguing that women were naturally more caring, religious, altruistic and moral than men, and therefore that enfranchisement would improve the quality of political life and legislation.<sup>7</sup>

The belief that women could initiate major changes in both the style and substance of government – municipal and national – was potentially revolutionary, and often expressed in portentous language, rich with religious allusion. As one suffrage pamphlet put it, “the soul of woman has heard the call of destiny.... It bids her to ... work out the salvation of generations to come.... We preach the glad tidings of a new gospel to humanity”.<sup>8</sup> Even the down-to-earth Dr Elsie Inglis – pioneer physician and secretary of the National Union of Woman Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in Scotland – was heard in the vestibule of St Giles’ (where she was a regular worshipper) to speak joyfully “of the time coming when we, the women of Edinburgh and of Scotland, would help to build the New Jerusalem, with the weapon ready to our hand – the Vote”.<sup>9</sup>

The Edinburgh churchwoman, writing in 1918, had surely not been sitting in splendid isolation, dreaming up her magnificent vision of female citizenship to usher in the Golden Age. She was characteristic of the women of Edinburgh and Scotland who, having achieved that weapon of the Vote, were determined to act quickly, and collectively, so that the church would support the political education and activity of “the most potent force of the future”.

Although she is not identified, it is reasonable to suggest that she belonged to the Women’s Council of St George’s West United Free

<sup>6</sup> S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Woman Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain* (Cambridge, 1986), 15.

<sup>7</sup> One feminist in Scotland who did not share that view was Theresa Billington-Greig, who argued in *The Militant Suffrage Movement* (1911) “The claim that women will purify politics ... is often based merely upon the old sickly sentiment which has survived from the days when men in search of self-approval promulgated the angel-idiot theory. There are suffragists who claim that women have a higher moral nature, and who will accept any statement, however extreme, based upon that assumption.”

<sup>8</sup> E. Pethick-Lawrence, *Women as Persons or Property* (WSPU pamphlet, 1913).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Lady Frances Balfour, another Presbyterian stalwart of the Women’s Movement, in her biography, *Dr Elsie Inglis* (London, 1918), 100.

Church, in the centre of Edinburgh. It was one of the most prominent of the post-Disruption Free Churches, and it provided a worshipping community for many of the Edinburgh women involved in progressive reform movements. The congregation was also a locus for consideration of the role of women in the whole denomination: an issue which was debated during the General Assemblies from 1915 to 1918. Professor James Young Simpson, who taught Natural Sciences at New College and the Glasgow UF College, introduced the 1914 overture which led to the setting up of a Special Committee on Recognition of the Place of Women in the Church's Life and Work. Both he and J.H. Oldham, who together presented the Reports of the Committee in 1915 and 1916, were elders at St George's West.

In May 1918, supported by their minister Dr Kelman, the Women's Council petitioned the UFC General Assembly. Its crave was to undertake, as a matter of urgency, the education of the new electors so that they apprehended their new opportunities and responsibilities; and it asked the denomination to make the necessary arrangements (whether by arranging classes or lectures, or by the appointment of temporary female agents) to ensure that this was done.

The St George's West *Congregational Notes* for June reports that the petition was received with sympathy, and had been referred to the Home Mission Committee, for conference and action in cooperation with the Women's Home Mission Committee. The Committee had been authorised, if so advised, to employ one or more women agents "for the purpose of presenting the higher aspects of electoral duty before the women electors of the Church and the country, and to take such other steps in the matter as may be found expedient, including the issue of literature".<sup>10</sup>

1918 was an eventful year, especially for the women of the congregation. On 27 June, a new assistant to the minister was dedicated at the end of the evening service. Her name was Evelyn Simson. She had been appointed partly due to the unexpected departure of the ordained assistant, and the wartime difficulty of finding a man to take his place. However, Dr Kelman was clearly aware of the symbolic, as well as practical, implications of the new appointment:

A step has been taken of much significance, not only for the congregation, but for the church.... She is the first woman who has been officially appointed to such work in the UFC. She has been associated with the movement which has included many new developments and openings for the careers of women

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<sup>10</sup> *St George's West Congregational Notes*, iii (1915 - 1918), June 1918, 7.

in the land, and this office may justly be looked upon in that connection. Yet in a deeper sense this ministry is not new within the Church.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Evelyn Simson's responsibilities did not suggest that she was given authority to make any radical departure from areas traditionally understood as "women's work". She visited old and infirm members; she edited the congregational notes; she co-ordinated the range of activities under the aegis of women's organisations, and also those which concerned the newly appointed committees with both male and female representatives. She played no part in the oversight of worship (neither, it seems, had the male ordained assistants at St George's West much say in this aspect of church life). But her official designation and salary were innovations which suggested an openness to future developments in recognising the status and authority of women employed by the Church.

The Women's Council at St George's wasted no time in organising locally, what they hoped would soon be happening nationally. They planned to direct attention to such questions as Citizenship, Temperance and Education. Two addresses in November – the month when the Representation of the People Act was passed – focused on citizenship, and what the Women's Vote may do. The Girls' Auxiliary was a lively organisation for young women aged between 15 and 30, with strong leadership at St George's West, which organised sessions on "Citizens in Training".

In 1919, the Kirk Session formalised a process for consultation with women members. A committee was established, comprising the Kirk Session and twelve women, for regular discussion and co-operation in matters relating to the welfare of women in the congregation. Dr Kelman was again conscious of the significance of this arrangement, noting that the appointment marked an epoch in the history, not only of the congregation, but also of the Church.

Also in 1919, both the HMC and the WHM reported to the General Assembly that they had taken action in response to the previous year's petition. The Women's Home Mission declared:

Women have risen marvellously to the War Work and surely now, released from that, we shall realise our duties and privileges as citizens, and will throw our energy and enthusiasm into the work of reconstruction, which makes for righteousness, contentment, and the means of living purer, happier and nobler

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1918, 7.

lives. With regard to the remit of the Assembly anent extended franchise ... It was agreed that Women's Citizens and similar Associations were adequate for the education of new electors, if properly utilised and developed by members of our Church who serve on local branches.<sup>12</sup>

Female leaders in the established Church of Scotland were also well aware that they would have to reckon with post-War changes in opportunities and attitudes, especially among younger women. The Woman's Guild began a major reconstruction of its constitution and organisation. It published articles about the awakening of the citizen, exhorted members to get out and vote, and especially to take an active part in municipal and welfare concerns.

"‘They’ has become ‘We’", wrote Marion Gray in 1920, "and the sooner we women recognise that, the better. If streets are ill-kept, if the milk is of poor quality, if there are too many pubs, if the houses of the poor are not worthy of the name of homes, if education is not right, if public money is wasted, we can no longer content ourselves with palliating evils or trying to supply deficiencies in an amateur way.... The greatest obstacle is apathy.... But a pull all together can do a great deal, and the courage to keep on will come if we lift our eyes to the ideal of the Kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup>

Gray's article, suggesting that Christian citizenship must be exercised in the dustbin as well as in Parliament, reads like a manifesto for the Scottish Women's Citizens' Association (EWCA), which was set up to organise and educate newly enfranchised women into a significant political force. The EWCA was inaugurated in the City Chambers on May 9 1918. Although those who formed the Association saw it as a new movement, it was clearly in continuity – through membership, interests and campaigning – with the pre-war suffrage movement. Ex-members of both militant and constitutional organisations – the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the Women's Freedom League (WFL) and the NUWSS were all involved. Most of the prominent members were also (in keeping with the norms for their class and context) churchwomen. The paid secretary of EWCA, Agnes Macdonald, had been a WSPU activist who had spent time in Holloway jail. In Glasgow, Frances Melville, Mistress of Queen Margaret College ( who was first Scottish woman to graduate BD, from St Andrews in 1910) and Elizabeth McKerrow, (prominent in UFC

<sup>12</sup> Women's Home Mission Report to the General Assembly, 1919.

<sup>13</sup> *Life and Work* (1920), 73.

women's work, and future Woman's Guild National President in the post-1929 unified Church of Scotland), both served as WCA presidents.

The stated purposes of the Association were to ensure the adequate representation of women in local administration; and in the affairs of nation and Empire; and also to engage in education for citizenship. In addition they pursued social and welfare goals, directly through voluntary organisation, and indirectly by lobbying local and central government. The annual reports of the EWCA give some flavour of the concerns and methods which the association (with well over 1000 members, organised in branches throughout the city) adopted. The problems of "Mental Deficiency" and "Maternal Morbidity" were addressed in study circles (an approach to learning which was widely used in church organisations during the 1920s). There were debates about birth control. Plans for slum clearance and development of municipal housing were followed and inspected. The EWCA parliamentary sub-committee considered, and lobbied on a range of concerns: conditions and wages in the catering trade; sexual offences against children and young people; legislation on child adoption; Scottish laws on solicitation; factory legislation, especially in relation to clauses affecting women and young people; the need to introduce universal and equal Parliamentary franchise.

This agenda suggests an active and committed membership, concerned to act constitutionally. Membership lists include and affirm women's educational and professional qualifications. The EWCA took seriously the range and legitimacy of their political concerns, and their right to express these as organised women. But these were self-consciously perceived as particular public issues in which women had a distinctive, natural interest. Sue Innes has researched into the discourse of post-war women's citizenship. She describes it as a form of social feminism, through which issues could be addressed within a conception of *equality for*, which did not question the assumption that women's political citizenship was gendered, and therefore *different*.<sup>14</sup>

Women using their vote, learning about the issues of governance, and standing as representatives, embodied practical equality in a political process which would, through women's influence and priorities (defined as though unproblematic), resolve pressing social needs. As the Edinburgh Churchwoman's beliefs about citizenship imply, women had faith in the possibility, and also their right, to reshape priorities and definitions of what was important and what was

<sup>14</sup> See S. Innes, "Women and citizenship: social liberal feminism in Scotland as a response to a new political frontier, 1918-1930" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1998).

marginal. A language of duty, service and the future-directed vision of the City of God helped create the public space for them to explore this new world. One of the leading lights of the EWCA was Councillor Euphemia Somerville, who stood and was elected as an Independent. Her particular concerns were housing provision and child welfare. She was a very active member of the Church of Scotland, and spoke far and wide on Christian citizenship. Indeed, she led study circles at St George's West Church during the early 1920s, in preparation for the major British inter-church Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC) held in Birmingham in 1924. There, she was one of the Church of Scotland participants. Cllr. Somerville's words, full of biblical cadences, embody the ethos through which the EWCA with the confident maternalism of their class, promoted an interventionist social liberalism:

Then pass out into the City. Do all to it that you have done at home. Beautify it, ventilate it, drain it. Let nothing in it that can defile the streets, the parks, the public places: nothing that maketh a lie in its warehouses, its booksellers' counters, its galleries. Educate it, amuse it, church it. Christianise capital, dignify labour, provide for the poor, the sick and the widow. So will ye serve the City.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the quasi-religious language and a membership committed to forms of social or ethical Christianity, the Women's Citizens' Associations surely represented a minority of post-war Presbyterian churchwomen. Certainly some effort was made to adapt the Woman's Guild to a higher public profile, and members were encouraged to use their political power especially in the cause of temperance (during the 1920 Local Option campaign, which was an almost complete failure – a matter of great disappointment to those churchmen who confidently anticipated that the collective power of women would ensure that Scotland would be rid of its regrettable predilection for over-indulgence in alcohol). But the efforts by national leaders at Guild headquarters did not bear much fruit. There is little in the local records to suggest that women in branches were fired up with new ideas about their enlarged role; and much which hinted that the postwar organisation suffered from grassroots stagnation. The Woman's Guild claimed political non-involvement, but the prevailing tone of its public voice during the 1920s often reflected the domestic and imperial agenda of the Unionist party. The plethora of new voluntary associations for

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in EWCA Souvenir Leaflet, 1939 National Archives of Scotland [NAS], GD1/1076.

women, including not only WCAs, but also Townswomen's and Co-op Guilds, and the Scottish Women's Rural Institute, were perceived as competition for women upon whose time and service for many years the church had claimed a monopoly.

In 1928, the EWCA invited the Woman's Guild to appoint two members to a special committee which would plan a demonstration in the Usher Hall, "to celebrate the achievements of electoral equality, and to arouse the interest of new voters in their citizenship".<sup>16</sup> However, after considerable discussion, and a vote, it was decided that the Guild could not accept, because the invitation was in connection with objects outwith the purpose for which the Guild existed. This rather narrow interpretation of the aims, which excluded the largest Scottish women's organisation from a symbolic and practical role in promoting a respectable celebration of female political equality, is perhaps indicative of the Guild's failure to develop its potential as a central force in Scottish public life.

The United Free Church may to some extent have offered a more open, outward-directed and progressive environment for women who were dissatisfied with the limited and restrictive opportunities of service without status. Its missionary work had always had a higher profile, and there were some notably independent and unconventional women who pioneered their own and other's rights to fullness of life – in foreign fields, and at home. The UFC Women's Missionary College, under its innovative principal Annie H. Small, encouraged solidarity, tolerance, individual development and a truly ecumenical and global perspective. It also contributed to the professionalisation of women's church work, which challenged the traditional understandings of female mission and ministry. After the 1832 Reform Act, and during the following century of Parliamentary change, the professional authority of men was linked to the growing political ascendancy of the male middle classes, expressed in their status as public citizens. In the same period, the charitable and religious work of disenfranchised women, understood as their special mission, was performed largely without payment, and generally under the authority of men. During the post-war ferment, the language of *mission* seemed inadequate and outdated to describe the claim of women to professional and public authority. Especially for those who espoused the rediscovered theological category of the Kingdom of God, in preference to the evangelical individualism or social conformity which had characterised so much institutional Presbyterianism, the concept of *citizenship* was much more

<sup>16</sup> NAS, Church of Scotland Woman's Guild Central Council Minutes, 11 April 1924.

potent. It linked the right to enjoy the social prestige, financial independence and emotional rewards of professionalism, with the altruistic desire to use political influence responsibly, for the benefit of all – especially the weak, poor, sick and oppressed members of society. For such women (mostly of the urban middle classes), the eschatological City offered a compelling image to embrace their personal, professional, political and religious aspirations.

It is surely not surprising, then, that those who were most enchanted with the vistas opened up by their citizenship, were also at the forefront of the struggle to expand and transform the exercise of Christian ministry by women. Mary Levison, a trained theologian, deaconess, and finally minister, whose endeavours during the 1950s and 1960s were instrumental in securing the admission of women to ordination in the Church of Scotland, wrote in 1992 about her own experience of *Wrestling with the Church*:

I do not like the term “woman’s ministry”.... If it refers to a ministry different from that of men then question it because this will almost certainly mean an inferior ministry prescribed by men for women.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly the forms of ministry officially sanctioned for Presbyterian women since the 1880s, were prescribed by, and under the authority of, men. Dr Archibald Charteris, who instigated the Woman’s Guild and the revived order of deaconesses as part of his grand plan to encourage meaningful lay participation in the Body of Christ, was a genuine supporter and advocate for the right of women to lead more active and responsible Christian lives – but within carefully defined limits. From the 1887 foundation of the Guild, and during subsequent developments of women’s work in both established and Free Presbyterian traditions, it was apparent that most male office-bearers wanted to benefit from the goodwill, service and admiration of women, without relinquishing control, decision-making, status – or indeed very much money. But by the beginning of the Great War, there were rumblings of discontent and frustration (especially on behalf of ill-paid deaconesses and parish sisters). Professor J.Y. Simpson argued in support of his addendum which led to the establishment of the Special Committee in 1914:

There is much in the conditions under which women’s work is carried on in the church which is a virtual contradiction of the Church’s beliefs.... Disillusionment and disappointment is

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<sup>17</sup> M. Levison, *Wrestling With the Church* (London, 1992), 135.

suffered in many cases on entering into Church work.... It seems to be standing for something which dissipates the spirit of equality.<sup>18</sup>

There were few men (or indeed women) in the Churches who contemplated the possibility that the ministry of women might include ordination – as elders or ministers. When Frances Melville (who belonged to the Established Church) graduated in theology in 1910, she did hope that the time would soon come when she could test her vocation. The UFC Committee on the Recognition of the Place of Women in Church Life and Work had considered, and then dismissed the need to discuss something for which they believed there was little demand. The Committee proposals included opening the administrative function of deacon to women, but the debates at presbytery and General Assembly uncovered a deep-seated anxiety about *ordaining* them to this office. It was finally decided that suitably qualified women could be appointed, but not ordained, to Deacons' Courts: it was acceptable to let women do the work, but without the traditional dignity and status conferred by ordination.

In the aftermath of the suffrage struggle, and the War, there were women who believed that to open the ministry of word and sacrament to women was a question of citizenship – a matter of justice, since they were equal citizens of the State; and an urgent gospel imperative, since women also had a vocation to call others into citizenship of the New Jerusalem.

Eunice Murray was one of most forceful campaigners (and national secretary) of the non-violent militant suffrage organisation, the Women's Freedom League. She was the first Scottish woman to stand for Parliament (as an Independent candidate, in Bridgeton during the 1918 General Election). In 1923 she delivered a lecture in Govan Town Hall on "Women and the Ministry". She contended that Christ stood against the subordination of women, upheld their dignity and worth, and called them, along with men, to labour in the Kingdom's cause:

Are our ministers still under the influence of Mr John Knox; are they too conservative to march with the times, or are they too prejudiced to concede this act of justice to women?... We must come to the conclusion that if ministers refuse to accept women who have a call ... they do not care so much for advancing the cause of Christ, of getting earnest people to declare the good tidings, as they care to keep this one and last

<sup>18</sup> *United Free Church General Assembly Proceedings and Debates [UFCGAPD]* (1914), 230.

profession for their own sex. This profession, which should have been the first, is the last to capitulate to the demand for sex equality.<sup>19</sup>

Murray concludes with a warning echoed by other writers of this time:

If the Church refuses to hear the message women have to give, they will find other channels through which to speak. They are no longer dumb and incalculable, they have learnt to express themselves clearly and well. They are organised and united, they do not lack courage or determination.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth Hewat was one woman who lacked neither courage nor determination. She had worked as a missionary, and on the editorial team of the *International Review of Missions*, before returning to Scotland to serve on the staff of the Women's Missionary College, in 1922. At the same time, she embarked on a theological degree at New College. She, like Euphemia Somerville, attended the COPEC Conference in 1924. It made a big impact, and she reported three striking features of the event to the community at St Colm's in Edinburgh (where the Missionary College was located).

First, it had named the huge social, political and economic problems which confronted the nation and world, and agreed that there was a common task which had to be tackled by churches working together. Second, it affirmed that Christ's teaching had to be translated, for the contemporary situation, into the transformation of the social order, as well as for individual lives. And third, COPEC was a foretaste of the Kingdom, because responsibilities for organisation, speaking, leadership and prayers, were shared between men and women; clergy and laity.<sup>21</sup>

In 1926, the EWCA General Meeting passed a motion. "congratulating the Edinburgh UF Presbytery on its decision to submit an overture to the General Assembly, to initiate legislation declaring the eligibility of women for admission to the colleges of the Church, who, on completion of the prescribed theological studies, may be licensed to preach, and ordained to the ministry on the same terms as men".<sup>22</sup> The Association planned to cooperate with other bodies to encourage church gatherings to receive deputations on this subject.

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<sup>19</sup> WFL Pamphlet (Glasgow, 1923).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Women's Missionary College House Magazine, 1924.

<sup>22</sup> NAS, GD 333/2, EWCA Annual Report, 1926.

1926 was the year when Elizabeth Hewat graduated B.D. She, and other women, had to be registered as “irregular students” – barred from the receipt of bursaries and prizes, and also from the opportunity to be trained and tested for licence and ordination. The concern addressed by the overture was that, without these opportunities, such students would not be fully equipped for their vocation to serve the Church, abroad or at home. As Professor J.Y. Simpson remarked during the debate:

They had in their college in Edinburgh a young woman who had beaten all the men in her class. It was going to be extremely difficult to have to say to her, or other young women like her: “You have gone through your course in this admirable way, you are giving your life to service in the foreign field, and yet we cannot put you on the same level as the men”.<sup>23</sup>

Those who argued in favour of ordination were able to point to the *de facto* developments – including appointments such as Evelyn Simson’s at St George’s West, and the theological capacity of those who had taken courses, or full degrees. It was evident that women were now able to fulfil the practical and educational criteria for ministry. Other professions had allowed the entry of women. Missionaries, deaconesses and church sisters had proved their capability for the teaching, pastoral, leadership and administrative functions of Church office. A few had even ventured into pulpits. Supporters suggested that ordination would simply be due recognition and consecration of God-given gifts which could, in this fullness of time, be discerned in women.

Opponents contended that the Holy Ghost, having inspired Paul and others to counsel male headship and female submission, “would not now go against his own productions”.<sup>24</sup> And there were practical concerns: the admission of women to the ministry, claimed Mr Adamson from Ardrossan, would discourage a certain class of men of virile type from entering the profession. Who would be head of the manse? Married women surely could not work as ministers – for their supreme vocation was motherhood. All in all, a great deal of modern feminism was pathological.<sup>25</sup>

Such men (and they represented the great majority of General Assembly commissioners) were not able to countenance that women, as individual human beings, could exercise a ministry and citizenship on an equal basis. In fact, as the 1915-18 process had shown, their primary concern was not function, but status and symbol. Utilising the labour of

<sup>23</sup> *UFCGAPD* (1926), 228.

<sup>24</sup> *UFCGAPD* (1926), 229.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

women in an ever widening range of capacities was all very well as a pragmatic arrangement. But it was something else to contemplate the idea of women in positions of public leadership and oversight as an alternative to submitting to husband and domesticity. Still less could they envisage the possibility that a woman might seek to exercise the male prerogative of profession *and* marriage. According to the still potent doctrine of separate spheres, a woman must either fulfil or sublimate her maternal vocation: she should not usurp male authority in home or in Church.<sup>26</sup>

Elizabeth Hewat was the first woman to receive each of three theological degrees at Edinburgh University: B.D., Ph.D. and D.D. She became professor of history at Wilson College Bombay, and an elder in the Church of South India. Her academic record was exceptional, but in other ways she typified progressive churchwomen of her generation, in that she simultaneously worked within the separate sphere of female organisations, campaigned for equal opportunities, and argued for new ways of being the church as a community of women and men in comradeship. A few years after the 1926 debate, when the question of women in the ministry was brought before the reunified Church of Scotland, Hewat wrote:

We in Scotland have always prided ourselves on liberty, the facility with which we can adapt our traditions and practices to the demands of the time, on freedom from superstition and convention, on the desire to get down to foundational truth, on our willingness to follow the spirit of Christ. Are we going to betray all these in this question of the equality of women?<sup>27</sup>

She articulated the views of a small but significant group of Presbyterian women who, in the aftermath of the Great War, believed

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<sup>26</sup> This issue was of more than theoretical interest to Vera Kenmure and her congregation. Vera was the first Scottish woman to be ordained to the ministry of a mainstream denomination in Scotland. She was ordained and inducted as pastor at Partick Congregational Church, Glasgow, in November 1928. In 1929 she applied for recognition as a minister of the Congregational Union of Scotland, and in April 1929, the Union carried a constitutional amendment which allowed "minister" to apply equally to women and men. Vera Kenmure exercised a fruitful ministry, but there was controversy in 1934 when, after the birth of her son, a minority group within the congregation argued that the duties of motherhood were incompatible with those of ministry. She received many unpleasant anonymous letters, and eventually resigned, not because she agreed with their arguments, but because of the divisions and hostility. She established a new church, with a large number of former Partick members, and maintained throughout her working life that ministry was enriched by the added experience of being a wife and mother.

<sup>27</sup> *Life and Work* (1931), 139.

that their Christian citizenship could change politics, make Scotland a better place for people to live in; create of the Church a truly equal and justice-making community of women and men.

Working with others as self-conscious women citizens, they did make some impact on the municipal and national politics of their time. Between 1918 and 1929, Parliament passed twenty-one pieces of legislation which might be construed as responding to the claims of the Women's Movement. These included equal terms for divorce and guardianship, and the introduction of widows' pensions. However, in other respects, women's votes failed to make the predicted impact. The strengths of the social feminism promoted by the WCA were in its organisation, confidence, and focus on practical reforms. Its weaknesses lay in the unquestioning acceptance of old assumptions about distinctive female duties and responsibilities. As a largely middle-class organisation, the Women's Citizens' Association was ill-equipped to understand – or to value – the significant class and attitudinal differences of experience and outlook among Scottish women. One piece of legislation which should have been vital to the project of full citizenship for women – the Sex Disqualification Removal Act – failed to open up employment on equal terms – either within church structures, or in other fields of work. During the 1920s, public church pronouncements and prominent Presbyterian churchmen were vigorous advocates of patriarchal family values, and a conservative view of female duties and responsibilities. They led the attack on employment of married female teachers (and lobbied successfully for the introduction of a marriage bar from 1922). In general, women were exhorted, after the war, to return to the home and give jobs back to men. Influenced by the eugenics movement, with its “scientific” claims about links between inherited inferiority and moral degeneracy, the churches preached duty to home, country, Empire, God and the Church. Churchwomen who spoke with hope about their citizenship were at the same time under intense pressure (especially if they belonged to the “superior” social classes whose birth-rate was falling) to replenish the religious and racial stock and not to accede to the demands of selfish greed and ambition. The Report of the Church of Scotland's Commission on the War, *Social Evils and Problems* (1919) affirmed the traditional understanding of the Christian family, and warned of a “company of sinister forces” which were attempting to “weaken or destroy the all-important institution of the home”.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Social Evils and Problems* (Edinburgh, 1919) see especially the chapters by W.S. Bruce and Norman MacLean.

The boldly expressed hopes of a Golden Age initiated by the moral power of women were quickly tempered by the realities of struggling for change under the weight of male protectionism, political conservatism, religious retrenchment, and class divisions. During the 1920s, pioneering churchwomen like Elizabeth Hewat continued to encourage and challenge the church to stay true to its reforming heritage. But the loss of momentum in the women's movement, and the conservative backlash in the church, left them stranded on the margins of power and influence. Frances Melville believed that the most able young women were abandoning the church (or at least, their willingness to use the church as a forum or instrument for change). Those who remained, she wrote: "are becoming old, mentally as well as physically; dulled, quiescent, sitting in half-empty pews".<sup>29</sup>

Her warning was too readily discounted or ignored by a complacent church which had failed seriously to address the challenge of the women's movement, far less its ability to "direct and inspire" that potent force of the future.

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<sup>29</sup> *Life and Work* (1931), 145.